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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ALGIERS 000332

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TAGS: ELAB PHUM PGOV SOCI AG

SUBJECT: WOULD THE REAL AUTONOMOUS UNIONS PLEASE STAND UP?

REF: A. ALGIERS 110

1B. ALGIERS 140

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Thomas F. Daughton;
reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: The first two months of 2008 have witnessed a coordinated level of independent labor union activity on a nationwide scale. The strikes of early 2008 appear to have been effective in mobilizing participants across the entire country. The three major nationwide strikes so far this year -- January 15 (ref A), February 10-12 (ref B) and February 24-26 -- played on dissatisfaction over salary levels, the loss of purchasing power and laws concerning professions. The "autonomous" unions (non-state-affiliated unions representing a variety of professions) that called the strikes say they are united on the issues that concern them, but in the world of Algerian labor unions, all is not as it appears. Some union officials have suggested to us that certain unions are not truly "autonomous," but are in fact linked to the state, thereby tarnishing their legitimacy and calling into question the effectiveness of some strikes. It is not clear which unions are completely autonomous and which are autonomous in name only, and the autonomous unions generally have yet to attain real bargaining power. Coordination between the two types of unions has complicated the picture so far in 2008 with, in at least one case, two unions with the same name maneuvering for "official" status and street credibility. According to the press, the labor ministry, invoking a May 1997 regulation, has set a March 31 deadline for all unions to provide the names of all their members and evidence that they represent at least 20 percent of a given profession. But labor contacts say the requirement is nothing new, and is based in the law. END SUMMARY.

JUDGING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE STRIKES

12. (U) The press and unions have described the 2008 strikes as nationwide in scope. According to the January 17 edition of the French-language daily Liberte, union officials said that 83.21 percent of union members participated in the January 15 strike. The February 28 edition of Liberte quoted union official Meziane Meriane as being "very satisfied" with the level of participation in the February 24-26 strike, which was put at 85.21 per cent. There has been no independent verification of the levels of participation, and the effect of the strikes in Algiers appeared quite limited.

Press reports have provided anecdotal evidence that participation varied by geographic region. Those reports also indicated that striking workers in the education and health sectors had a greater impact because of the size of the groups affected by their actions: primary/secondary students and individuals seeking medical care.

TWO SNAPAPS DUEL FOR LEGITIMACY

¶3. (C) In a February 19 meeting Rachid Malaoui, president of one of two versions of the National Autonomous Union of Public Administration Employees (SNAPAP), told us that the Algerian government was promoting a "false nationalism" in order to divert attention away from its failures. As part of this effort, he claimed, in 2004 the government created "parallel unions" -- spinoffs of already-existing autonomous unions. One example of this is the pair of unions called SNAPAP devoted to the same profession and competing for legitimacy. Malaoui said the Algerian government thereby gave the impression, both domestically and internationally, that the country had viable labor institutions and recognized the need to have them. Reality, he asserted, is completely different: the parallel unions are not independent, but merely additional tools used by the state to control Algerians. The parallel unions are not truly legal, he added, but the government still chose to deal with them on labor issues. Malaoui acknowledged that it was difficult for the average Algerian to distinguish among the various unions and claimed the situation made it all the easier for the government to manipulate.

¶4. (C) Turning directly to the spate of strikes that began in January 2008, Malaoui drew a clear distinction between

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strikes organized by the Inter-trade Union Organization (IUO), an umbrella organization of seven autonomous unions to which he has ties, and the National Coordination of Autonomous Unions (NCAU), an umbrella organization of twelve autonomous unions. (Note: The NCAU organized the January 15 and February 24-26 strikes; the IUO organized the February 10-12 strike.) Malaoui claimed that despite their "autonomous" name and presumed independent character, the NCAU-affiliated unions were creatures of the state. He also described the NCAU strikes as not true strikes but mechanisms through which the state could buy time to address concerns. Referencing press reports, Malaoui said that the January 15 nationwide strike was perceived as having a significant level of participation because the state wanted to give the appearance of allowing expression so that it could later be seen making a deal. He criticized the lack of independent verification of union participation in the strike, and accused the press of reporting only what the unions told them about participation rates.

¶5. (C) According to the March 5 edition of the French-language daily El Watan, the labor ministry, invoking a May 1997 regulation, has set a March 31 deadline for all unions to provide the names of all their members and evidence that they represent at least 20 percent of a given profession. The article added that the ministry reserved the right to disqualify non-compliant unions. In a March 19 conversation, labor ministry contact Amina Heddad told us that Article 35 of Law 90-14 of June 1990 -- not an internal regulation -- requires all unions to provide annually the names of their members. She also confirmed that all unions comply. Malaoui described the requirement as a "formality" and not new to unions. He confirmed that his branch of SNAPAP would comply with the ministry's request.

REPORTS OF GOVERNMENT RETALIATION AGAINST STRIKERS

¶6. (C) Ali Lemdani, secretary general of the National Council of Secondary and Technical Teachers (CNAPEST), which claims

60,000 members, told us March 1 that the 2008 strikes should not be viewed as new and significant by themselves, but as part of an ongoing continuum of strikes that began in 2003. He also claimed that some state employees had been transferred to jobs further away from their homes as punishment for participating in strikes. According to press reports confirmed by Lemdani, National Education Minister Benbouzid fined education sector strikers three days' pay for participation in the February 24-26 strike. Press reports also said Benbouzid terminated the contracts of all temporary teachers in retaliation for going on strike, but we have not been able to determine the number of affected individuals. Lemdani told us that the government does not negotiate with autonomous unions, saying it has "conversations" with the General Union of Algerian Workers (UGTA) instead. (The government-affiliated UGTA is the largest union in Algeria, boasting well over a million members.) Not surprisingly, Lemdani rejected the UGTA as a substitute for negotiations with other unions.

WHO'S WHO

¶7. (U) Although the complete picture of which unions are truly autonomous and which are surreptitiously linked to the state is unclear, following is a list of the members of the IUO and NCAU umbrella groups:

Inter-trade Union Organization (IUO):

National Council of Secondary and Technical Teachers (CNAPEST)
Autonomous Union of Education and Professional Workers (SATEF)
Algiers Higher Schools Council (CLA)
National Union of Education Workers (SNTE)
Coordination of Algerian Contractual Teachers (CECA)
National Autonomous Union of Public Administration Staff (SNAPAP)
National Union of Paramedical Professors (SNPEPM)

National Coordination of Autonomous Unions (NCAU):

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National Council of Higher Education (CNES)
National Union of Permanent Researchers (SNCP)
National Union of Medical Science Professors and Docents (SNPDSM)
National Union of Medicine Lecturers (SNMAM)
National Union of the Education and Training Staff (UNPEF)
National Autonomous Union of Secondary and Technical Teaching Professionals (SNAPEST)
National Union of Education Workers (SNTE)
National Union of Public Health Practitioners (SNPSP)
National Union of Veterinarians (SNVPAF)
National Union of Public Health Specialized Practitioners (SNPSSP)
National Autonomous Union of Public Administration Staff (SNAPAP)
Autonomous Union of Educational and Professional Training Workers (SATEF)

¶8. (C) COMMENT: While in general agreement on the issues, Algeria's autonomous unions have yet to unite in a way that connotes true bargaining power. Our contacts tell us the strikes of 2008 suggest a coalescence and greater coordination among the real autonomous unions, while those affiliated with the state compete for the loyalties of Algerian workers. The government response in the first two months of 2008 has been muted and restrained, though it appears poised to push for greater control of the playing field. Despite the "nationwide" title, the strikes did not paralyze the country. Certainly, some cities and regions were more affected than others, but in Algiers it was largely business as usual.

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